Stover, B. D.

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Women of West Central Africa

Woman's Board of Missions
of the Interior

Room 523, 40 Dearborn St.
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By Mrs. Bertha D. Stover
of Bailundu, Africa

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BY MRS. BERTHA D. STOVER

West Central Africa

THE West Central African Mission, situated 12 degrees south of the Equator in the countries of Bailundu and Bihe, was first opened in the year 1881 among the Ovi Mbundu tribes, whose language, though extending over a very large territory, had never been reduced to writing. Here, instead of the kraals of South Africa, we find villages—groups of villages. The houses are four square walls made of upright sticks with strong corner posts and cross sticks, plastered on both sides with mud and thatched with grass. Though they have but one door and no window, and are dark and full of smoke, they are cool in the daytime and warm at night. The Chief's houses occupy the center of the village, surrounded by a rude fence; across a narrow alley are the other compounds, row after row, according to the size of the village, and all is surrounded by a strong stockade covered by a net work of creeping plants.

Condition of Women

Here, amidst the squalor of an African village, surrounded by her children, chickens, and pigs, we will find the typical Umbundu woman. Though

perhaps not as degraded or down-trodden as her sisters in other portions of the dark Continent, she is not unlike them in having for her chief end and aim in life no higher ambition than to marry and to cultivate a field.

The condition of the mother determines the condition of the family. If she is a purchased slave her children are slaves; if free born her children are also free, except that all females are virtually the slaves of the brothers and uncles on the maternal side, and they may at any time sell these women and children to cancel their debts, though the father or husband may redeem them if he can.

No word for Home exists in the Umbundu language. They always say "my village," never "my home." These villages are composed of several men with their various wives, children, concubines, and slaves, each family having a separate compound.

Though polygamy is the rule, it genders no end of strife and unhappiness. Not all wives quietly submit, while one will grieve and weep when number two comes in, another will rage and threaten, even resorting to such harsh measures that her lord is glad to promise that she shall reign alone. And the only case of suicide which the missionaries have known was that of a woman who hung herself when her husband brought home his second wife.

Marriage

Here wives are not exchanged for cattle. When a man wishes to marry a certain female, he sends a friend to negotiate for him. If all is favorable he visits them and presents the parents, master or uncle, as the case may be, with a few yards of cloth, giving the bride-to-be a new dress (?) also. It sometimes occurs that the girl rejects her suitor. If her friends consider him especially desirable because of rank or wealth, they may compel her to accept him by confining her in a dark hut without food, even beating her, but as a rule such measures are not resorted to. When the wedding day arrives, friends escort the bride to the groom's village, where a feast has been prepared; they eat flesh and drink blood together, which is the marriage vow, and it is supposed to be the only meal they ever partake of together. The evening is spent in dancing and beer drinking. On the morrow several friends dress the bride's hair, which is an elaborate process. Over all the braids is smeared thick yellow palm oil or tallow, and her toilet is complete. That evening she goes home to her own village to remain as long as she pleases. When she returns she brings her hoe, baskets, pots, and sleeping mat. Her mother sends to her new son a fowl, a basket of beans, another of meal, and a gourd of beer, and from that day he is never expected to look upon his mother-in-law's face, it being a great shame. Wives are

rarely beaten, and a wife may leave her husband for almost any provocation, and many a bride "goes home to mother" before the honeymoon has waned, but for a little coaxing is willing to return. Husbands sometimes exchange wives or give them for a debt.

Work

While it is true these women are looked upon as inferior beings and are really the beasts of burden, yet they do have some privileges not accorded to women in some other tribes. Not infrequently the husband assists in the field work, or keeps fire and cooks the beans and cares for the little ones (except the infant), while the wife is absent. He builds the house, weaves the mats, hollows out the large gourd, and carves the rude wooden bowls. She weaves baskets, moulds pots, pounds corn, brews beer, aside from the drudgery of field or village life. In cases of trial she is permitted to plead her own cause, and witness for others. But oh! the utter blankness, desolation, and hopelessness of these lives without the Gospel of Christ!

Death

There is no sound so unutterably sad as the wailing for the dead. When a little child dies it is taken from the mother's arms and carried by some female relative to a convenient spot where it is buried in a shallow grave, which is heaped with sticks and stones; but too often, alas! these are not enough to thwart the hungry hyena. When a man dies his wife must lie

day and night by the corpse till the interment, which may not take place for a week or ten days. No wife or mother ever follows her dead to the grave. For one month she must sleep on a mat on the ground with a block of wood for a pillow and a couple of yards of calico for a covering. Every morning at sunrise, and again at sunset, she goes out doors and wails for the dead. All this time she abstains from food, except a little corn meal gruel. This is supposed to please the spirit of the departed. At the time of the funeral all the friends of the deceased assemble at his village. They dance and feast and make merry till the contents of store-house, field and hen-roost are exhausted; and on their departure the widow finds herself stripped not only of all food for herself and children, but even of a pot to cook in. Such is the sympathy she receives.

Dress

She is a slave to fashion as well as superstition. Among the Mundombe and Chisanze tribes we see women with immense coils about their necks. A string of beads is placed on the neck of a baby; to this is added, year after year, more beads, cowry shells, beans, tacks, etc., all being matted together with palm oil, red clay, mingled with charcoal, and the accumulated filth of years, till its weight often exceeds twenty pounds. This she wears day and night, till her husband dies, then it must be cut off.

Women of West Central Africa Carrying Water to Irrigate Fields

A woman may boast of but two yards of calico for her person, yet her ears, arms and ankles are loaded with rings. She can talk of her pigs and goats but knows nothing of her soul. It is almost impossible for her to comprehend a spiritual thought.

Love of Children

But there is a divine ray even in her dark mind, and "A little child shall lead them" was meant for the African mother as well as her white sister. She does love her little ones, and, in her way, is kind to them, though in her ignorance she teaches them many evil practices. Yet the mother heart is there. Often in conversation she will say she is glad to have her children hear the "sweet message," though she is too old and is entangled in meshes of evil which she thinks cannot be removed. There is nothing a mother so quickly responds to as admiration of her child. In no way can we so readily reach a mother's heart as by relieving the sufferings of her little one. And so, dear friends, you see the need of *Christian motherhood* in Africa; *Christian homes* for example: *Christian women* to lead into light these who for ages have been groping in darkness.

The Christian Home in Africa

And, thank God, the blessing of His word is to be seen today. Step with me into this Christian home. The house has three rooms. There are doors and windows and a fire-place. The walls are whitewashed and adorned with

pictures cut from papers. Pegs driven into the walls hold the extra clothing. A tick filled with straw is on a rude bedstead. We see rude tables, and stools, and dishes. That neatly dressed, placid-faced woman sitting there has no palm oil on her hair. We listen as she spells out the words of her Sabbath-school lesson, and the little children playing on the floor are singing "I am so glad that Jesus loves me." A door of escape has been opened before them, and oh! may the Christian women of America see to it that it is not closed again.

As this message from Mrs. Stover passes into a new edition, we see that the "door of escape" for these West Central African women, which was entirely closed until 1881, has been opened still wider. Besides Mrs. Marion M. Webster of Bailundu, the Woman's Board of the Interior now has Miss Emma C. Redick at the new Ochileso station, and Miss Nellie J. Arnott at Kamundongo, who arrived in 1905 and entered upon her work with joy.

Best of all, the native women who have entered the "door" are, even thus early, opening doors for others. Some of them are fine, noble products of Christianity, who are apt to teach and zealous to communicate the joy they have found in their Saviour. They go to the women of other villages, telling

the old, old story in picturesque ways that reach their heathen neighbors' hearts.

The Woman's Conference, held in connection with the Annual Missionary Meeting, is having a powerful influence in their development. To it they are willing to travel long distances on foot, each carrying her babe upon her back, and the food for the long journey and the conference days upon her head. Each returns "hoping she can go next year," while their husbands, proud of this new education for their wives, care for their children at home.

At some of the sessions missionaries are present to give helpful instruction; at others the African women lead the devotional exercises and discuss things pertaining to Christian life. "We are builders for eternity. Our works are to be tried. How can we make better homes? How can we train our children to live aright among the heathen? What can we do for them on Sunday afternoons? How can we bear much fruit? Our bodies are not our own; may we smoke and use snuff?" Such are some of their questions.

A marked figure at the Woman's Conference held in Bailundu was a converted witch doctor from Kamundongo who had burned her charms and turned with full heart to her Saviour. "The words of God are true, and our charms are of no effect," was her testimony. Her great influence over the

women continued until the day of her sweet Christian death.

The work in this mission cannot stand still. It advances from grade to grade. It is ours to help this people to a nobler faith, a purer life.

THE WOMAN'S BOARD OF MISSIONS OF THE INTERIOR

ROOM 523, 40 DEARBORN ST., CHICAGO

Native Delegates to the W. C. African Woman's Conference